

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 688

TM 810 586

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TITLE Title I Needs Assessment Practices and Utilization in Local Educational Agencies.  
PUB DATE Apr 81  
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (65th, Los Angeles, CA, April 13-17, 1981).  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Compensatory Education; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Federal Regulation; \*Guides; \*Needs Assessment; \*State Departments of Education; \*State School District Relationship  
IDENTIFIERS Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I; \*Evaluation Problems; \*Oregon

## ABSTRACT

The Oregon state Title I office has developed two needs assessment guidebooks to assist districts in complying with Title I needs assessment regulations. The first guidebook was developed in 1974. Following its dissemination, needs assessment procedures in Title I districts were closely monitored for compliance with the regulations, and it was apparent that it had not had a significant impact. A second guidebook was developed in 1981. It was written to update the process in accordance with new regulations, reaffirm to districts the necessity to conduct a needs assessment, and improve some of the shoddy practices which recent monitoring and auditing reports had cited. Interviews with local district staff indicated that the new guidebook was an improvement over the first version. It has stimulated an increase in reliance on objective sources of information and has resulted in a slight decrease in the amount and variety of survey approaches. Several problems with needs assessment utilization were identified: districts already feel constrained to provide basic skills programs; and needs assessment is more important when a district faces a budget decrease, and less important when program funding is static. (BW)

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Title I Needs Assessment Practices and Utilization  
in Local Educational Agencies

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1981

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## Introduction

By law, local school districts are required to design their ESEA Title I projects in accordance with the results of annual needs assessments. Specifically, Public Law 95-561 lists three purposes served by needs assessment: (1) to identify and select children having the greatest need for special assistance, (2) to identify the general instructional areas on which the program will focus, and (3) to determine the special educational needs of participating children. This wording mandates that LEAs follow a model of rationality in program development that has been in vogue in the educational planning literature over the past ten to twenty years. The premise is that resource allocation decisions should be based on empirical knowledge of students' "needs" if those decisions are to be defensible. This notion has much common sense appeal. It would be difficult to argue for the opposite position, especially in a society that reveres rationality with quasi-religious zeal.

While it is easy to profess support for educational needs assessment in principle as a planning tool, the concept begins to suffer when reduced to operational terms. Myers and Koenigs (1979) point out some of the difficulties:

There is no common methodology. There is no agreement about the data to be collected and analyzed. In fact, there is not even a widely accepted definition of "educational needs" which the term needs assessment purports to be assessing. In short, it would appear that the demands for data to guide today's decisions have resulted in a variety of idiosyncratic approaches to a long-term problem of concern to many people (p. 1).

How, then, are local school districts to interpret and act on the needs assessment requirement in P. L. 95-561? How are LEAs to bridge the gap between concept and operational reality? When one looks to the Title I

regulations for guidance on how to implement the law, it turns out that the regulations are essentially a restatement of the law itself. No definition of educational need is offered, nor is any particular methodology suggested. The next level of authority over implementation of the Title I law resides with the state educational agency. The state, charged with monitoring compliance with Title I regulations, is also expected to assist districts in understanding and operationalizing these requirements. The next section of this paper describes efforts taken by the Oregon Department of Education to fill this role. Following that discussion, the paper describes current Title I needs assessment practices at the district level and examines some of the reasons these practices fall short of the ideal embodied in the law.

#### History of Oregon Leadership in Title I Needs Assessment

The state Title I office has developed two needs assessment guidebooks to assist districts in complying with Title I needs assessment regulations. The first appeared in 1974; the second guidebook was issued in 1981. Both were prepared by subcommittees of the State Title I Advisory Committee and were distributed throughout the state. The following paragraphs describe the initial impetus for the 1974 guidebook and its major features.

The 1974 Guidebook. The state's first attempt to clarify federal needs assessment regulations was developed in response to findings listed in a HEW Audit Report for the period September 1, 1967 to June 30, 1973. The audit examined the records of 40 districts and included field visits to eight districts in Oregon. The HEW Audit Report cited the state for inadequate needs assessment procedures: "In seven of eight LEAs we found that projects had not been based upon comprehensive needs assessments."

Responding to the Audit Report, the State Title I Advisory Committee and the Oregon Title I office created a subcommittee to draft a needs assessment guidebook. The subcommittee found it necessary to write a conceptual definition of the term needs assessment, interpret the existing regulations and develop procedures that school districts could follow.

The needs assessment definition drafted in 1974 is as follows:

A Title I needs assessment is a set of procedures and processes, including data collection, analysis and prioritizing which compares the existing educational status of children with expected (educational) attainment (Oregon Department of Education, 1974, p. 1)

To clarify this definition, the subcommittee devised a set of procedures that would constitute needs assessment in Oregon.

An initial step in developing these procedures was locating needs assessment in the flow of activities which make up administration of a Title I program. A flow chart (Figure 1) was drawn which identified needs assessment as an integral part of the program planning, student selection and evaluation process. Needs assessment procedures in the 1974 guidebook

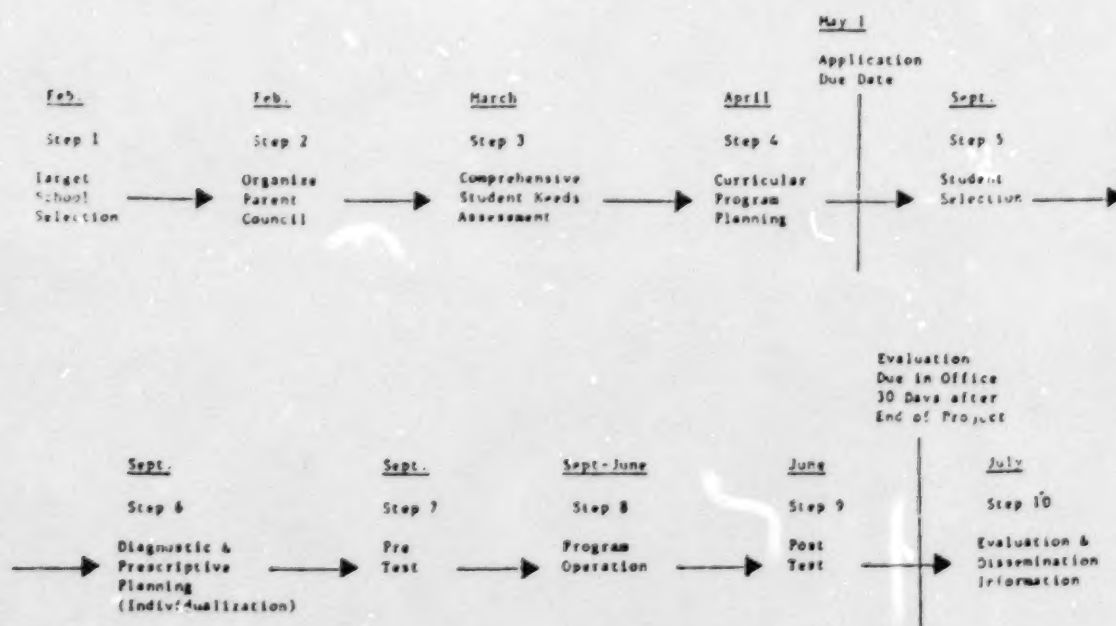


Figure 1. Title I Project Flow Chart

revolved around the collection of subjective judgments from various sources. The term "comprehensive needs assessment" used in the regulations was interpreted to mean a thorough collection of data about student needs. The guidebook advised that "generally, this means collecting information about needs of students from parents, teachers, students, other community members and from school records." (p. 4) It appeared that the most feasible way to collect this data was to survey the appropriate populations regarding the educational needs of students in the target schools. Additionally, data from school records would be compiled and summarized with the survey data. Sample survey forms were included in the guidebook.

Also in 1974, the state Title I application required that a description of the needs assessment be included for consideration in the application review process. The needs assessment description and results was intended to help the state Title I staff determine if a district's program was designed to meet the needs of its students.

#### Problems Detected in LEA Needs Assessment Practices, 1974-1980.

Following dissemination of the 1974 guidebook, needs assessment procedures in Title I districts were closely monitored for compliance with regulations and guidelines. The monitoring process proceeded on the basis that a complete needs assessment is integral to the design of a Title I project. Monitoring and auditing reports consistently cited non-compliance in the needs assessment process. Districts requested assistance and guidance in the interpretation of needs assessment law and regulations and the practices or techniques for conducting a needs assessment. It was apparent that the 1974 guidebook had not had a significant impact. The practices detailed in the guidebook had eroded over time and law and regulations had changed in wording and interpretation.

Some of the problems were as follows:

- The practice of needs assessment had practically become synonymous with opinion surveys of the populations associated with the target schools. This subjective data was rarely augmented with the collection of objective information on student achievement. (From 1973 to 1981, the regulations have tended to more and more stress the role of objective student achievement data in needs assessment.)
- In many districts, needs assessment became an important activity of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC). PAC members developed and distributed the questionnaires and tabulated the results. This practice became a mixed blessing--PAC members considered needs assessment to be an integral part of their involvement with the Title I program, perhaps the single most important role they could play in exercising influence over the district. They became very involved in the process.

On the other hand, PAC members generally lacked the technical skills to construct questionnaires that could elicit valid and meaningful responses from those surveyed. They also lacked the skills to interpret the data for the purpose of planning Title I projects.

- School staff and PAC members often did not see the needs assessment process as a joint venture. At the program planning stage, the PAC tended to rely on professional educators' judgment, often remarking that "the educators are the experts and should know what the program should be."
- District administrators and teachers had little experience dealing with the entire concept of children's needs. For example, one needs assessment question asked, "Can your child make change at the grocery store?" It appeared to collect data regarding the child's arithmetic skills. Instead, as a parent pointed out, it was a useful question only if the child valued money and was concerned about adding and subtracting money. If not, no amount of skill in arithmetic would help the child. It appeared that the concept of "need" should be better delineated and the relationship between needs and values researched.
- In some districts, the general news media or prevailing philosophical beliefs seemed to influence the assessment of educational need more than grassroots opinion or observation of children. Probably the greatest influence in this respect, however, was the U.S. Office of Education, which virtually decreed that the educational needs to be served by Title I were the basic skills--reading, math and language arts, in that order. USOE monitors pressed Oregon state monitors to insure that programs were directed toward basic skills improvement, chiefly reading. State monitors, in turn, pressed districts to run basic skills programs.

- To districts, it didn't appear necessary to conduct a needs assessment--simply develop a basic skills project. Districts were required to document their choice with objective and subjective data. They used the data most accessible to them--chiefly surveys and teacher judgment for subjective data and sometimes achievement test scores as objective data. The needs assessment in this instance could not be termed a comprehensive identification of students' needs. It was confined to reading, math, and language arts. Many educators initially balked at this, wondering if they could prove science or social studies was the basic need. However, the objective data--usually achievement test scores, which measure only basic skills anyway--precluded any discussion of a Title I curriculum outside the mainstream of the three Rs.
- Annual assessments with similar survey forms and sources of objective data showed virtually the same results year after year. Initially, LEA staff appeared interested and pleased with responses by school patrons to the surveys. But when they found the same pattern of results annually, they felt it was a waste of time, effort and money to repeat assessment procedures. It became possible to predict how the needs assessment would turn out, with a great deal of certainty.
- State Title I monitors determined that district staff rarely used needs assessment results in program planning or in making program changes. Most often, it appeared that needs assessment was an exercise--a pro forma activity carried out to avoid the embarrassment of a reprimand from the state office. Even when a district found that assessed needs had changed from reading to math, it was slow in believing the results or implementing a program change.
- Staffing the Title I project was the primary consideration in some districts when it came to decisions about changing the instructional focus of the program. Whatever the tenured staff was able (and willing) to teach tended to determine the Title I project thrust. Several districts were concerned that the assessed needs were not in the existing staff's repertoire. This was compounded by the state's certification requirements--a reading endorsement being necessary to teach reading. Perhaps a district would have no credentialed reading staff or, as happened in several districts, the assessed need changed from reading to math and it became necessary for a reading teacher to take over a math project or be replaced by a math teacher.
- The problem of compiling data from disparate sources has plagued needs assessment efforts. Subjective data is not easily combined with achievement test results to obtain an overall index of a school's current status. Adding expert opinion, teacher judgment, community members' sentiments, parent and student questionnaire results, scores from standardized tests and textbook and teacher-made tests strains the sophistication of most school people. Districts with trained evaluators did in some instances combine such data using a system of weights and values which provided a uniform index of assessment results.

The 1981 Guidebook. The confluence of these problems led to the development of a second needs assessment guidebook, completed and disseminated in February 1981. It was written to update the process in accordance with new regulations, reaffirm to districts the necessity to conduct a needs assessment, and improve some of the shoddy practices which recent monitoring and auditing reports had cited.

The primary sources of guidance for development of the new guidebook were: (1) Public Law 95-561, Section 124(b), (2) the Report on the Educational Amendments of 1978, H. R. 15, and (3) Title I draft regulations, Part 116(a). The Conference Report was detailed in describing the rationale for Title I needs assessment, and was used as the framework for the three steps in the needs assessment flow chart (Figure 2). Law and regulations detailed the compliance items which were integrated into the flow chart. Further, the authors of the guidebook used their own experience in school districts with Title I programs to develop a set of procedures that was reasonable and practical in a school district.

The guidebook details some practices that differ from the previous version. First, needs assessment is viewed as a three step process: (1) a general level needs assessment, identifying the major instructional focus and grade levels to be served, (2) student selection, and (3) a comprehensive student level needs assessment. The earlier guidebook did not consider the second and third steps as part of the needs assessment process. Second, each of the three steps has associated with it a set of outcomes which provides "documentation" of the needs assessment procedure. These outcomes represent milestones in the planning of a Title I program, each at a greater level of specificity.

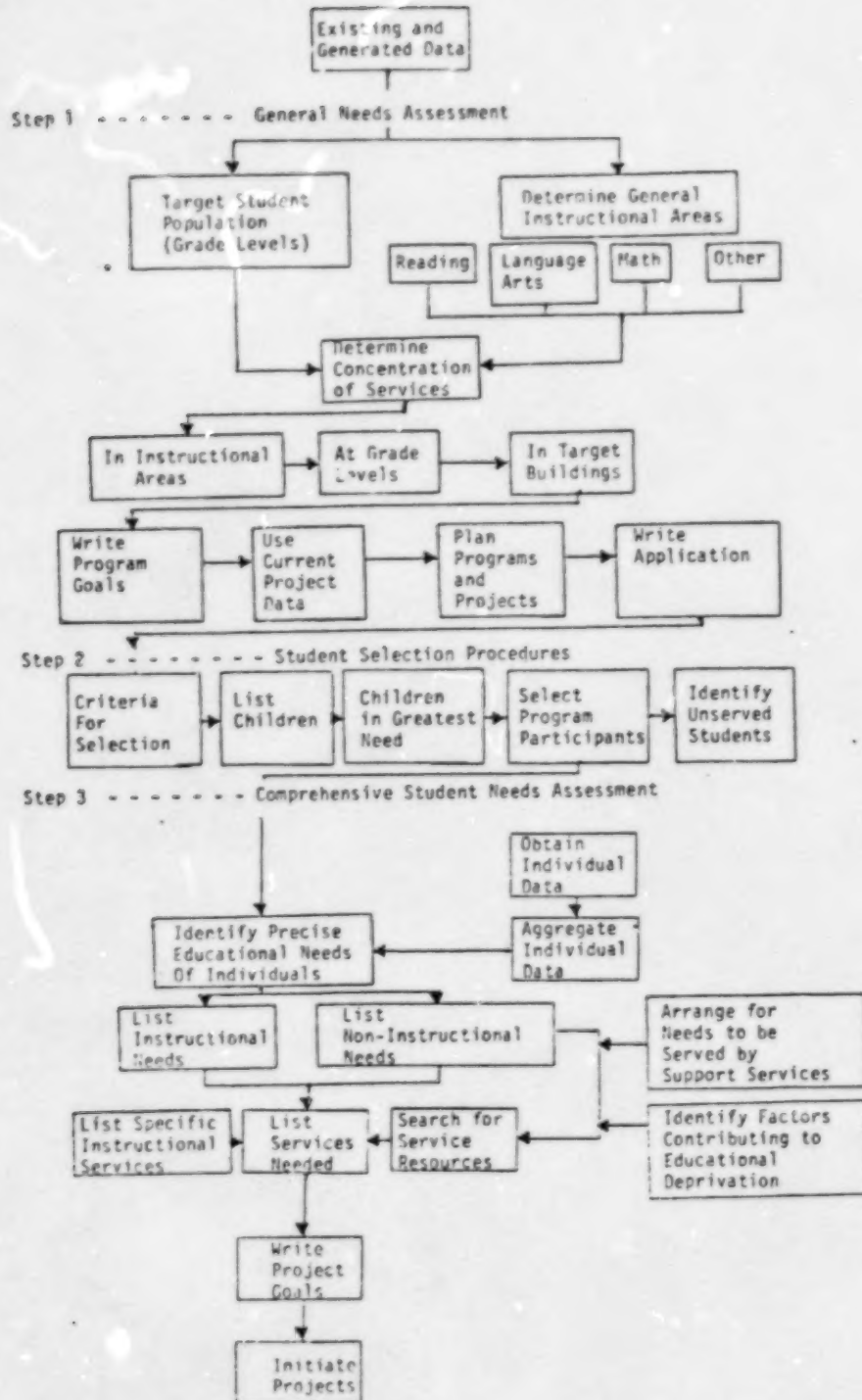


Figure 2. Needs Assessment Flow Chart

### Impact of the 1981 Needs Assessment Guidebook

After release of the 1981 guidebook, an interview study was conducted to determine perceptions of LEA staff regarding the utility of the new manual and to examine factors related to utilization of needs assessment information in program planning. An underlying purpose of this study was to discover whether the guidebook was "on target" in alleviating some of the problems noted through Title I project monitoring. The study also sought to identify those barriers to needs assessment utilization that no amount of persuasiveness or technical assistance could overcome.

Title I coordinators in fifteen school districts were interviewed (a copy of the interview guide is provided in the Appendix). Districts selected for the study covered the range in enrollment size found in the state as a whole.

Utility of the 1981 Guidebook. One of the most consistent comments was that the new guidebook is an improvement over the previous version. It was perceived to be well organized, presenting needs assessment not as a one-time event preceeding application writing, but as a stepwise process of generating increasingly more specific information about students served by the Title I program. The guidebook systematized what had tended to be a variety of discrete activities, locating them within a logical framework. The respondents agreed that the guidebook was useful in clarifying Title I needs assessment regulations, better conveying what is to be expected of the district.

For those LEAs that had relied only on survey methods for securing information on student performance, the guidebook had put the importance of objective data in a new light. These districts were in the process of

analyzing achievement test scores along with the more traditional sources of information. Two were putting into operation the method suggested for combining disparate kinds of needs assessment data.

Four of the coordinators commented that the guidebook was "too overwhelming." They had not viewed needs assessment in quite the depth portrayed in the manual.

Summarizing the views on the guidebook's impact, it appears that it has stimulated some increase in reliance on objective sources of information and has resulted in a slight decrease in the amount and variety of survey approaches. The guidebook seems to have assisted coordinators understand procedures for combining different sources of data.

Needs Assessment Utilization in Program Planning. Many of the problems related to needs assessment utilization mentioned in the earlier discussion were affirmed by the respondents. Because they already felt constrained to provide basic skills programs, they had relatively little latitude in determining the focus of their programs; usually the choice boiled down to whether the program should offer reading, math, or both. Needs assessment data did seem to have more of an impact on the grade levels at which services were targeted.

One consistent finding was that needs assessment appears to play a more important role in project planning when a district is faced with a Title I budget decrease. Most of those interviewed stated that the current year's needs assessment would be more relevant than those of past years because of anticipated funding decreases. The coordinators felt that decisions on program components to be reduced or eliminated must be empirically justified. This seems attributable to two factors. First, the decisionmaker

seeks to reduce services in areas least likely to cause widespread criticism. The cut must not appear to be capricious or based on his or her personal bias. If complaints are received, the coordinator can turn to the needs assessment results as an external justification for the decision. Second, the reduction should be made in services where it is least likely to be felt, meaning that fewer students are affected and the educational needs of those students are less severe than the needs of those who will continue to be served. In almost all cases, the interviewees expressed a heightened interest in using needs assessment data to justify their decisions, given the impending budget cuts.

A corollary to this finding mentioned by many respondents is the relatively minor role played by needs assessment when programs are static in their funding. Under such conditions, there is no major incentive to change the program; in fact, there are many disincentives. These include: (1) high start-up costs for getting a new project off the ground, involving hiring and training new staff and purchasing new materials, then waiting a year or two until the project is operating smoothly; (2) the feeling that if the present program is effective, one shouldn't try to change it without ample reason, (3) an emotional commitment to the existing program staff. Unless a program change can be accomplished without disrupting Title I program staffing, it is unlikely to occur under conditions of static funding.

The underlying finding related to needs assessment utilization is that the data will play a role in program modification when there are additional incentives to change and when the disincentives are relatively less important. This use of needs assessment is most akin to the type labeled

by Myers and Koenigs (1979) as "program or policy justification."

When a program or policy has been developed or is in use, data might be gathered and analyzed to justify its implementation or continuation. One might already have a fair amount of informal support for the policy or program and simply want to test these conclusions with quantitative information (p. 8, italics in original).

Title I program managers do act rationally. However, in designing or modifying educational programs for disadvantaged children, decisions are based on a wide variety of factors. A formalized needs assessment and the resultant information constitutes only one of these factors.

### References

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## INTERVIEW GUIDE

We are interested in the ways the state's Needs Assessment guidebook has influenced your thinking about needs assessment and how it is carried out in your school/district. Therefore, I would like to know what you have been doing in the past and what you plan to do in the future (or are currently doing). First, let's start with what you have been doing.

1. Could you describe your approach to Title I needs assessment over the past few years? (Allow S to describe the approach with no prompts at first; as he runs out of things to say, begin asking more specific questions in the areas listed below. This strategy is predicated on the assumption that the most salient aspects of needs assessment will be described before specific probes are necessary.)
  - o What sources of objective data have you used?
  - o ...At what grade levels?
  - o How detailed is the information? (Distinguish between Steps 1 & 3)
  - o What kinds of subjective data have you used?
  - o Who provides the subjective data?
  - o How did you determine what kinds of subjective data to include in the NA?
  - o Does the kind of data you collect (objective and subjective) vary from year to year? (I.e., do you do a comprehensive needs assessment periodically and less extensive assessments on the "off years?")

If YES, how does it vary? (Get description of what's collected at what times)
  - o Who participated in...

NA planning (e.g., general strategy, specification and development of instruments, general planning of data analyses, etc.)

2. Can you describe your current plans for conducting Title I NA? (Use same strategy as previous question, same kinds of prompts.)

- o What sources of objective data are you using?
- o ...At what grade levels?
- o How detailed is the information? (Distinguish between Steps 1 & 3)
- o What kinds of subjective data are you using?
- o Who provides the subjective data?
- o How did you determine what kinds of subjective data to include in the NA?
- o Will the data you collect vary from year to year?  
If YES, how will it vary?
- o Who is participating in...  
NA planning  
  
NA implementation  
  
NA interpretation and analysis
- o Other probes on current approach...?

After discussing characteristics of past and current NA efforts, delineate the differences between the two for the interviewee. This is done mainly to check interviewer's perceptions and to uncover any other changes that weren't mentioned before.

3. From what we've talked about so far, it seems that what's changed in your NA approach is....

Do you feel that this is an accurate reflection of the changes that have occurred?

4. What part did the NA Guidebook play in fostering these changes?

5. How has the NA Guidebook assisted you in...

- o Understanding the Title I NA regulations
- o Conceptualizing a NA process
- o Making NA a more beneficial or useful activity in program planning
- o Getting more mileage from a given set of data

6. How worthwhile an activity is Title I NA? (Be sure to distinguish between steps 1, 2)
- o What are the major benefits? Why?
  - o What are the major weaknesses? Why?
  - o How are your NA results acted upon? (What project characteristics tend to be influenced by NA data?)
7. Take several key characteristics of Title I projects that in theory are to be affected by NA results and try to determine how these characteristics are decided upon.

Step 1 Subject areas

Grade levels served

Step 3 Specific content within a given subject area

8. Is there a more informal process--unique to each project--that serves the function of NA? (E.g., instead of step 3--instruction is totally individualized, with the teacher employing a variety of diagnostic approaches)

Are

9. the project designs more a function of their staffs (existing) or the documented needs of students in the school?